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ABSTRACT

The paper offers approaches for promoting positive relations between school and homes of culturally different students. Teachers and other school personnel should become knowledgeable about different cultural practices and should show respect for the parent's insight and experience. Promoting parent participation may include making arrangements for transportation, scheduling meetings at convenient times, and discussing the child's progress with extended family members. Parents can themselves serve as liaisons between their cultural community and the school. Additional suggestions include avoiding the use of educational jargon and respecting the verbal and nonverbal patterns of interaction used by different ethnic groups. Teaching strategies with culturally different students should focus on developing expressive language skills and helping the students feel included in the group. (CL)

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MODELS FOR PARENT INVOLVEMENT WITH CULTURALLY DIVERSE GROUPS

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In America, we now find that children come from as many backgrounds as there are cultures represented in our world society. In fact, the steady influx of immigrants and refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Cuba, Haiti, Mexico, the Philippines and other countries has helped to create school districts with widely diverse student populations. Interestingly, the United States Immigration Service reported that over 175,000 school age children legally immigrated to this country in 1983 (Newell, 1985). To this figure, add the numerous children of illegal immigrants, and the sizeable number of native born minority group children, and you will soon recognize that culturally different children comprise a significant proportion of the total school population.

This influx of culturally different families has a positive influence on communities by helping to break down barriers that once existed among the different groups. In addition, the cultural diversity among children and their families creates challenges for encouraging parental involvement within school programs. The importance of parental involvement in all aspects of the educational planning and placement process has been confirmed and reconfirmed. Yet, excellent intervention programs may lose their effectiveness because individual family cultural patterns are disregarded. The family and its cultural affiliation are important factors exerting significant influence on how children learn and acquire social values. The process by which children learn their cultural roles and responsibilities is described as enculturation (Soldier, 1985).

Differences in learning styles are the result of socialization styles

reflecting the values of cultural groups. The middle point in the enculturation process is the teaching style of the family. The final stage in the sequence is the learning style of the children (Castaneda, 1976). The importance of the culture and the role of the family in facilitating learning is strongly emphasized. As long as there are no interferences with this process, and parents are effectively involved in school experiences, children are able to learn and achieve to their optimal capacity. When home and school continue the enculturation process as partners, children are secure in knowing how to act and what to expect.

Unfortunately, we find that in too many instances such a partnership does not exist. The values and cultural orientation of many professionals involved in the education of culturally diverse children represents a sharp contrast from that of the children in their classrooms. As a consequence, culturally different children are often judged in school with criteria that vary considerably from the criteria used in their homes and communities. Pepper (1976) compared the values held by minority groups with those held by individuals in the dominant group. In comparison to the dominant society, culturally different groups appeared to perceive the family as the strongest unit of society. Family kinship bonds are intense, strong and supportive. The family nucleus included not only the immediate family, but also the extended family of aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, and other relatives. In addition, culturally different groups place greater emphasis and value on

cooperative endeavors; revere elderly persons; work for the common good; include children in adult activities; etc.

One can readily note the differences and their implications for understanding the self-conception of culturally different children. Traditionally, the schools in our society has attempted to disregard the world view of culturally different children and to filter all individuals through the values of the dominant society. The results of this process has not always been in the best interest of those children and families involved.

In fact, many culturally different children have become acculturated in order to survive in the world outside their homes and communities. The process of acculturation can be viewed as a continum ranging from "traditional orientation" to "assimilated" with a span in the middle representing individuals who are "acculturated." Those in this middle span can be considered bicultural or comfortable in both worlds (Chinn, 1979; Soldier, 1985). Importantly, culturally different children and their families are represented at all points along the continum.

Teachers and other school personnel must become familiar with the cultural orientation represented by the children and families served by their programs. If our educational process does not take into account the rich backgrounds of our people, it fails its students. It fails children from different cultures by not recognizing the heritage and expectations that have shaped and continue to influence those children. It fails children from traditional American backgrounds by

not providing experiences that will encourage future interpersonal growth, harmony, and understanding. It fails its families by not actively working to utilize the vast array of human resources and learning supports available through the involvement of parents from culturally diverse groups. Emphasis must be placed on recognizing differences and working within those differences rather than forcing minorities to suppress their ideals, values and beliefs.

As school personnel, we must never forget the role of parents with regards to orienting children in the values of their culture, as well as their role in socializing and teaching their children. When viewed as a system incorporating structure, life cycle, function and style, the role of cultural affiliation is pervasive. The cultural orientation of the family influences the family's division of labor, coping mechanism, marriage, family communication, cohesion, etc. Cultural group membership affects possible support sources available to the family (i.e., extended family, friends, church, neighbors, etc.); directs socialization and recreational opportunities in which families participate; as well as defines factors affecting the parent's functioning with the child (i.e., roles, discipline, etc.).

Other than the family, schools are a most important factor in giving children a cultural awareness which can result in positive human development and healthy intergroup relations. Positive home-school relations are crucial in providing consistent, meaningful services to culturally different children. In order to enhance such relationships,

educational efforts must then encourage parental involvement, encourage children to enjoy satisfying relations in more than one cultural world, and encourage children to identify with aspects of each of these cultures.

Education must then be for the purpose of actualization of potential for the best possible interest of each person concerned so that they can lead a more meaningful life. Educational approaches must then embrace the fact that people are different. Learning opportunities must enhance self-concept and cultural identity. Simultaneously, learning opportunities must develop academic competencies, social skills, and civic responsibilities. The incorporation and recognition of the individual's cultural heritage facilitates the learning process and conveys a sense of identity and self awareness. Educational efforts must then be directed towards broadening the cultural base of the curriculum. Consequently, it is imperative that teacher and other school personnel become knowledgeable of different cultural practices of the children they serve.

There are numerous strategies to use in achieving this objective. A most important resource to educators are the parents and families of the children. Thus, it is important that competencies for relating to parents, as well as students, be developed. Too many times parents from culturally diverse groups are considered unconcerned about their children. This is a seriously erroneous belief. The quality of their children's lives is important to these parents. However, parents of culturally different children need to feel that professionals respect and value them for the

contributions they can make to their children's education. Professionals must encourage parent's contributions, listen to their ideas, as well as their criticisms, and respect their insight and experience. In the individualized educational planning conferencing process, professionals should find something positive to communicate to parents about their children. An inability to communicte positively, may suggest a need to re-examine the teacher-child relationship in order to determine what is wrong in that interaction.

Teachers should attempt to make it as easy as possible for parents to participate in the classroom and in individual educational planning meetings. This may necessitate providing child care, transportation, refreshments, and/or scheduling evening meetings for the convenience of working families. Teachers may also wish to explore alternative meeting formats. Examples of these include pot luck suppers, picnics, coffee clatches at school or other community site, fix-it workshops, give out free materials, etc. Importantly, in communications with parents, school personnel should remember that personal contact is much more effective than notes or phone calls. However, when written communications are used, these should be in a language understandable by the families.

In addition, teachers should be willing to talk with whoever comes on behalf of the child--whether it is an aunt, uncle, grandparents, older sibling, boy/girl friends, etc. In fact, parents should be encouraged to bring other family members to conferences especially if these are

people who have a continuing relationship and influence on the child. Above all, teachers and other school personnel should not get discouraged with parents for missing appointments, failing to show up at meetings, not following through on arrangements, etc. These factors should not be interpreted as parental lack of concern for children. On the contrary, such factors should encourage professionals to look for creative methods of securing parental assistance with the learning process. The patience and enthusiasm which is displayed by educators to parents may help parents in really believing that their involvement and assistance is essential to their children's progress in school.

Parents from culturally diverse groups can be used in a leadership role within the school. In such a capacity, parents can serve as crucial liasons between their cultural community and the schools. Parents can assume responsibilities for contacting other parents; locating community people to serve as resources to the school; serving as interpreters for other parents and/or children from their communities who require such assistance; etc. When parents are interested, committed and enthusiastics towards their involvement with the school, they can make more effective contacts and reminders to other parents than can school personnel.

Additional suggestions for involving parents from culturally diverse groups follow:

1. Plan activities where parents become a central part. As an example, a cultural celebration can be planned in which parents are

encouraged to highlight aspects of their culture through songs, dances, music, crafts, foods, etc.

2. When planning parent meetings, conduct a survey or needs assessment of parents in order to determine topics of particular interest to them. You will find that parents are more likely to become involved in school functions when programs and activities are specifically geared to address their stated needs.
3. Allow children to be the focal point of parent meetings. Children can participate in dramatizations, musicals, puppet shows, art exhibits, etc. The likelihood of parents attending meetings is increased when their children are being spotlighted.
4. Avoid the use of educational jargon in conversations with parents. However, teachers and other school personnel should be fair and truthful in discussions regarding children's strengths and weaknesses. School personnel should not slander or romanticize children's ability but use straight forward and honest talk.
5. Respect the verbal and nonverbal patterns of interaction utilized by different ethnic groups, and become familiar with the meaning of such body language.

While important for all programs, parent involvement is especially critical in programs serving children of many cultures. Parents of culturally diverse children bring different values and perspectives to

programs. Opportunities should be available to utilize their involvement not only to help specific children by tailoring assistance to their family background, but also to facilitate communication between home and school.

Another important strategy involves altering teaching styles and adapting the curriculum to meet the culturally distinct needs of children. The role of the teacher, and other school personnel, in relationship to children consists of discovering differences, appreciating them, and programming in ways that allow for and encourages differences as well as similiarities. Children would then participate in instructional programs which enhance their ability to function in their environment. These programs must be compatible with children's developmental levels, with the desires and expectation of their families, and their communities.

Teaching considerations for facilitating the learning of culturally different children should be directed towards developing expressive language skills. Within the classroom, children should be provided with frequent opportunities to interact with books, objects, and other learning materials. Teachers should supply children with the word(s) they need to orally describe what it is they are doing. These needed words should be in standard English as well as the native language of the children.

Teachers should assist children in feeling and being part of a group some of the time. Children should be taught to label and express how

they feel in ways that are acceptable in the classroom, and yet are also acceptable within their cultural group. Children should receive redirection rather than punishment of misbehavior. It must be remembered that inappropriate behaviors may sometimes occur when children are simply not knowledgeable of expected group behavior. Consequently, teachers must instruct children of the situational aspect of socially acceptable behavior. There are behaviors which must be modified in the classroom situation, but can be resumed within the cultural environment of the home or community. Teachers should permit children to participate in setting limits within the classroom. Such limits should be clear, concise, and consistently upheld. Finally, teachers must assure that children are participating in varied cultural experiences that use visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile skills.

Again, parents are important resources to use in implementing these learning goals. Parents can be advised of rules and codes of behaviors within the school. Parents can be assisted in establishing a similiar behavior program within the home which can reinforce appropriate behavior for the school. In addition, holidays, festivities, and observances of different ethnic groups offer unusual opportunities for the involvement of such parents in school activities. Unfortunately, the celebration of national holidays can be a source of extreme discomfort for children who are not a part of the majority group religion in this country. However, by planning activities and special events related to the

commemorations of cultually different children, school personnel can convey the feeling that such observations are important and worthy of recognition.

Parents may be utilized in the development of dual purpose instructional materials. Such materials would be accurate and sensitive in the treatment of culturally different groups. Yet, such materials should be useable in facilitating the achievement of learning goals and objectives for children. Parents may also be used as resources to secure original articles and artifacts, representing their culture, to use in the classroom. Such materials are important teaching tools and offer the advantage of being familiar to the children. Each of these procedures not only actively involves parents in the school program, but also enables children to develop an appreciation of human diversity and cultural background.

For children to develop these skills and acquire an understanding of their own background and of the many other groups which comprise our society, there are several important qualities or basic needs which school personnel should possess. These include:

1. The need to understand and accept the different lifestyles of the children in their program. Teachers must become aware of cultural mores that may influence children, and know what is acceptable behavior in that culture. This can be achieved through background investigation and study of the country or culture children represent. Once school personnel have increased their

cultural consciousness, such knowledge can be used to develop appropriate strategies for achieving the goals of the curriculum. Cultural diversity can then be used as one criteria for selecting and modifying the curriculum.

2. The need for training and experience in cultural diversity. Such training will help eliminate many of the negative stereotypes and fears that often accompany cultural ignorance. Within the classroom, this can be accomplished by utilizing available teaching opportunities to present accurate descriptions of culturally different children and their families.
3. The need to recognize the qualities held in common by various cultures and the differences which separate one culture from another. Children's cultural, ethnic and racial identity can be incorporated into stories, art projects and discussions about families, homes, likes and dislikes, as well as other related topics. When there is understanding of the ways cultures are alike, the differences are often easier to address.
4. The need for the development of professional competencies in relating to parents and the involvement of parents in all aspects of the learning process.

In summary, culturally diverse children are from strong, supportive and caring families. School personnel must recognize the strength of these families and become aware of the need for parental support of

learning goals and objectives for theic children. School personnel must remember that children are children first! Yet, cultural relevance, parental involvement, and sound special educational techniques provides a foundation for meeting the needs of culturally different handicapped children (Chinn, 1979). Such an approach provides culturally different handicapped children and all children with opportunities to understand and develop pride in their own heritage. In addition, this approach assists children in understanding and accepting the identity and heritage of other groups.

Traditionally, special educators and others who are involved with educating handicapped children have been advocates for tolerance and acceptance of differences. Consequently, acceptance and appreciation of cultural differences should require little if any transitions in professional values (Chinn, 1979).

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